

WORKING IN AN ETHICAL SCHOOL

Introduction

Why consider a discussion around working in an ethical school? After all, by their very nature, schools are considered ethical workplaces having a broad range of people vitally involved in their important community work. However, as people are involved, it's hardly surprising that we occasionally witness or hear of breaches of ethical standards. Recent scandals in the business world and breaches of trust in schools highlight the importance of having discussions around what it looks like to work in an ethical school.

What is it that characterises working in an ethical school? Forster (1998) suggests a range of characteristics illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Characteristics of an ethical culture in schools

Characteristic	Comment
Ethical awareness	Teachers are sensitive to implications of their own policies and practices as well as the school's and of the system, for example child protection policies
Acceptance of responsibility	School personnel accept personal responsibility for their actions, individually and collectively. Each individual accepts responsibility for their personal ethics as professionals, and for the ethics of the school as a whole
Ethical practices	Teachers practise in ways that are recognisably and consciously ethical guided by ethical principles embodied in a code

Based on: Forster, Kathie, (Dr), (1998) *Promoting the ethical school, professional ethics for school administrators* at www.schools.nsw.edu.au/edu_leadership/prof_read

First, however, let's look at two words, ethics and values, using a contemporary approach based on their organisational rather than philosophical use. Values refer to those principles that guide our judgment about what is good and proper. They reflect our aspirations around what we're here for, what defines us, who we are, what we stand for. Workplace values are the standards we set for our interactions with students, colleagues, parents and others and are unique to a workplace. Ethics on the other hand tends to refer largely to a range of rules-based behaviours. This is where you put your values to work when making decisions, understanding and knowing whether you've broken a rule or not, whether or not you're in the right or wrong area.

It's important to note that we need both values and ethics. We need the rules, however these are worthless unless informed and brought to life by the spirit, or ethos that underlies them. That spirit is the values that characterise the organisation, our school.

We need the ethical behaviour that will keep us within the boundaries of conduct expected of us as educators. We also need the values that pull us towards the future, towards the school we're trying to create and towards the people we aspire to be. Having greater clarity around both will help us work well in an ethical school.

This is where leaders have a major role, irrespective of whomever and wherever they are in a school, to ensure that ethics guide everyday school life and professional practice. Leaders can look for ethics guidance in codes of conduct which are often prescriptive in nature, as well as in codes of ethics which are aspirational in nature. Both are designed to change staff behaviours, however simply prescribing how people are to behave by regulation or by following the rules is likely to have limited value in terms of success. Of greater value is the leader demonstrating by their own actions and behaviours a commitment to shared school values enshrined in a code of ethics as this demands more than simply compliance. In this case, people are asked to take responsibility for their individual professional ethics based on these shared values and to take responsibility for the ethics of the organisation as a whole. The case below illustrates one area where values and ethics play a role in making decisions.

Tutoring Case

Greta teaches Year 10 Maths at her school, Sample College. Karen is one of her students. Karen's parents approach Greta asking her to tutor their daughter as they are keen for her to improve her maths.

Discussion Point: If you were Greta, how would you make your decision about your response to Karen's parents?

This case highlights that educators face ethical dilemmas where often it's not clear what is right or wrong, or what a person ought to do, or which perspective is right in moral terms.

In an ethical school leaders engage the school community in ways designed to ensure greater clarity around values and ethics, they are also likely to have developed an ethical decision making process. Having such a process would support Greta to make an ethical decision in keeping with the school's values. An ethical decision making method suggested by the SOLR Project (2003) is illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Model for ethical decision making

Step 1 - Identify the core issue or issues involved

Step 2 - Make sure you understand the facts

Step 3 - Identify the main players in this issue and see if you can identify their interests

Step 4 - List the values and ethical tensions at stake or in conflict in this matter

Step 5 - Critically reflect on the possible options and their likely consequences

Step 6 - Choose the option you think best caters for the values and ethical standards you believe to be important

Step 7 - Give reasons (to yourself and others) why you have chosen this option and show why it is better resolution of the issue than the other options, and

Step 8 - Make the decision but look for honest feedback and keep an open mind.

Source: *The SOLR Project Executive Summary, (February 2003), Contemporary Challenges and Implications for Leaders in Frontline Human Service Organisations, Flagship for Catholic Educational Leadership, ACU National, p.16*

So far we've looked at the importance to leaders of using values and ethics as a foundation to guide school life and at the importance of leaders creating and modelling ethical decision making processes.

Let's conclude by briefly looking at some of the tools and techniques leaders can use to create and nurture values-based schools and to support ethical decision making. We'll start with an Awareness Checklist (Figure 4.) leaders can use to assess teachers' current understanding and awareness around values and ethics.

Figure 4. Awareness Checklist

#	Question	Comment	Check
1	Codes & Policies – Profession/School	Are all people aware of the existence of specific Codes (Ethics, Conduct) and other related Policies? Do they know that these are a condition of employment? How do you know? What assessment instruments or procedures do you have in place?	
2	Induction	What do you do to ensure new people are aware of Codes/Policies? Are these integrated into induction/orientation programs?	
3	Advice	Are there mechanisms in place where people can receive advice on ethical dilemmas? Can people make disclosures about concerns they have with the actions of others? What measures are in place to assess staff awareness and comfort with these mechanisms?	
4	Customised values and ethics	Does your school supplement mandated Codes/Policies with its own customised Codes reflecting the specific challenges and dilemmas of your workplace? If not, why not?	
5	Understanding	What measures could be taken to increase peoples' familiarity with and understanding of Codes/Policies? What do you personally do as a leader to strengthen values and ethics as these are practised in your school?	
6	Practice and Modelling	Do people perceive that the school's values are practised and standards are applied fairly to everybody? How do you know? Do you have feedback mechanisms in place to obtain peoples' feedback on the schools performance against these values and standards? Are you confident that your behaviour and conduct would be seen by your peers and staff as embodying school values and ethics? How do you know? What assessment procedures or techniques do you use?	

Other tools and techniques leaders can use:

Dialogue

- Engage staff in discussions around values and ethical dilemmas
- Create ethical dilemma cases; have a panel provide differing reactions to the case; table groups discuss and report; panellists respond
- Encourage staff to contribute cases of concrete values and ethical dilemmas of concern to them
- Create a collection of these based on a synthesis of these contributions (an 'Ethical Compass')
- Continue the dialogue over time
- Ensure the dialogue helps resolve ethical dilemmas that occur when two or more values are in conflict and there is no right or wrong solution

Employment

- Ensure values and ethics become part of every employment contract
- Ensure values and ethics become a normal part of performance review; part of reward and recognition programs

Mission, Vision and Values

- Create School Mission, Vision and Values statements
- Encourage individual areas to create and align their statements with these

Leadership Commitment

- Leaders 'walk the talk'
- Appoint a lead person, a guide, a champion as a focal point or as someone who can assist on ethical issues

Assessment

- Ask questions such as:
 - How widespread is the dialogue around values and ethics here?
 - Is the dialogue helping to resolve real workplace issues?
 - What actions were taken because of the dialogue?

Thomas Sergiovanni (1992) argued that truly effective schools were those with clearly articulated core values which provide a standard by which actions are judged. Leaders not only take the lead in formulating these values, they actively encourage and support discussion around the practical issues involved in working in an ethical school.

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Resources

Forster, Kathie, (Dr), (1998) Promoting the ethical school, professional ethics for school administrators, at www.schools.nsw.edu.au/edu_leadership/prof_read

Research Report, (February 2003), Contemporary Challenges and Implications for Leaders in Frontline Human Service Organisations, Flagship for Catholic Educational Leadership, ACU National

Sergiovanni, Thomas J., (1992), Moral Leadership: Getting to the Heart of School Leadership, Jossey-Bass